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*Beneath the rule of men entirely great  
The pen is mightier than the sword*



## HIGHLAND RECOLLECTIONS

Related by the late John Skinner of Inver ©  
Published by Euilleam Ross & others

One day I bought a Springer Spaniel from a friend in Tain and brought the pup home on my bicycle, cosy as could be, tucked up in my haversack.

That day I remember was stormy, and after dismounting from my bicycle at my cottage door, a sizeable piece of thatch was displaced from my roof covering both the puppy and me.

There and then I thought that Thatch would be an appropriate name for my new puppy and so the choice of his name was made easy for me.

Thatch and I live by ourselves in an old-fashioned cottage on the shores of the Dornoch Firth overlooking the bay and gazing upon the rugged mountains of Sutherland.

This wonderful scene I view from my window each morning and its changing beauty throughout the seasons never fails to fascinate me.

Now, first of all I am going to tell you a little about my old fashioned cottage which is one of the few remaining of its kind that can be found throughout the Scottish Highlands. It has a fire place in the middle of the floor with a huge open chimney arrangement made with fir saplings and clay. There the smoke finds its own way out without the aid of vents or artificial draughts. Sometimes of course, and much too often for my liking, an adverse wind blows half the smoke out of the chimney, while the other half finds its way out through the space under the door.

### 50 years ago

It was in a cottage very similar to mine, some fifty years ago that an old woman named Annack lived. Not being able to attend school in her youth meant that she could neither read nor write and was only able to speak in her native tongue (Gaelic).

The old lady dearly loved a pinch of snuff, a habit she tried to conceal from her neighbours, without success, as the stain on her nostrils always gave her away. In those days snuff was considered a great luxury at four pence half penny per half ounce.

When at the age of fourteen I started to work in the nearby town of Tain, Annack entrusted me with the 'secret assignment' of bringing her home half an ounce of snuff from the chemists every Friday. If during the week she managed to save a few extra coppers, I would also be asked to bring her back a Black Pudding from the butchers.

I can well remember when on one of these secret snuff buying missions I entered Annack's cottage to find her room so full of smoke that I could hardly draw my breath. Indeed it was hard to make her out sitting by a fire of whin sticks, upon which was a sizzling pan containing the remnants of the Black Pudding I had brought her from the shop some days earlier.

## Salt Herrings

Poor old Annack, that was her only table delicacy, her chief food being potatoes, meal or salt herring. After I managed to get my breath back I remarked to Annack in Gaelic, 'its awful smoke you have tonight, its like to choke me,' To which came the following reply, also in Gaelic. 'Ach what's a little smoke? I've had it for the best part of eighty six years, it's would you be remember the snuff that was worrying me.'

I gave her the snuff securely wrapped in two layers of paper and tied with a piece of twine. The string was too fine for Annack's gnarled fingers to undo the proper way, so she pierced the wrapping with her thumb nail and took a sniff direct from the package, then very carefully placed the remainder on a saucer.

After that she began to examine, with the aid of a lighted whin stick, the black pudding she had on the frying pan. Suddenly down came a lump of soot right into her pan.

'Look Annack,' I said, 'look what has fallen in your pan, you can't eat the pudding now.'

'Why Not,' she said, 'what difference will a little soot make? Isn't it black whatever? Anyway it's the only sauce I can afford.'

Quite unperturbed she removed the black pudding from the pan to her plate and started to enjoy her evening meal.

Now there is a lot I could tell you about the old days but I had better bring you back to the present and tell you about Thatch. While he was growing up thatch played a lot and try as I might he was often too flighty for my liking.

## Geese and ducks

Soon after his second birthday however, he got the hang of what his role in life was and he began retrieving fallen ducks and geese like a veteran. In no time at all he could distinguish between Curlew, Oyster catchers and other birds.

Shelducks, however, intrigued him as he could not understand why I did not fire at them. I tried to explain to him that although they were classed as a duck they did not taste too good, and secondly they were so pretty that I did not have the heart.

These birds borrow the use of rabbit burrows during the nesting season and line each chamber with down from their breasts. After laying a clutch of eggs and sitting on them for a month, mother shelduck emerges at the head of a troop of ducklings in their braw colours. The old folk from the village refer to them as 'eion breck shichach' which loosely translated from the native tongue means, 'the tartan chickens of the shells'.

*The following is contributed by the publisher.* Each morning over many years Johnny cycled, with thatch trotting alongside, the three miles to his place of work by the shores of Loch Eye. During the shooting season a trusty 12 bore shotgun was slung under the crossbar of his bike and a patched tattered game bag graced his back.

On many occasions he would dismount from his bicycle and have a news with someone he would chance to meet, then more often than not he would offer a duck or goose to them for their dinner.

Johnny was devoted to Thatch and when at fourteen, old age finally caught up with the dog and he passed on to greener pastures, John the Wildfowler, gave up the gun. ©

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